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ON THE

L A W OF G O D.

BY

JOHN STANFORD, M. A. A

OPEN THOU MINE EYES, THAT I MAY BEHOLD
WONDEROUS THINGS OUT OF THY LAW.

DAVID.

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On the Law of God.

THE knowledge of the Law of God, being essential to our conduct and happiness, as rational creatures; and as a misapprehension of the nature and design of that law is a chief cause of error, delusion and disobedience, an attempt to explain so important a subject, may not be deemed unacceptable.

The WILL of God, is the invariable law to universal nature. The infinite number and variety of bodies, in the heavens, and on the earth, are preserved in their being, order and excellence, by a fixed decree, suited to the constitution of each. The least particle of matter, and the highest order of intelligent beings, are equally bound to the Throne of Jehovah—they necessarily conspire to magnify their Almighty Author, and teach us the wisdom and grandeur of a GOD. In the contemplation of this vast dominion of the Supreme, David penned the 148th Psalm; which needs only to be piously read, to inspire equal devotion.

The law of human nature, usually termed the moral law, is the subject of our present

reflections; and in which, we are more immediately concerned.—A law, not arbitrarily established, but founded in holiness, righteousness, and judgment; being a sufficient rule of conduct, and a source of happiness to man, who, on his creation, was endowed with powers suited to his obligation, and constituted the noblest of all sublunary beings.

The law is a mirror, in which the holiness of Jehovah shines in its perfection, and shews the creature, what degree of conformity he must bear to the moral image of his Creator. The holiness of God, is the infinite, absolute perfection and rectitude of his nature, as the eternal original cause and pattern of truth and righteousness in all. And, as God necessarily manifests this perfection in all his works; so especially it most gloriously shines in that law he hath given to men; the tenor of which is—*Be ye holy, for I am holy.*

The absolute authority of God, as the BLESSED *and only* POTENTATE, *the* KING of kings, *and* LORD of lords, shines with majesty in his holy law. By this, no possible condition of the creature can alter the nature of that law, under which he was made; or, annihilate his obligation to fulfil it. *All the divine commands are sure; they stand fast for ever and ever.**

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* Psalm cxi. 7, 8.

The essence of the law, is perfect love. *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; and, thy neighbour as thyself.** Agreeably to this, the beneficent Creator enriched the human soul with a nature and propensity to love; in the exercise of which, rational happiness was to consist. What object should reign supreme in the affections of man, but that God whose nature is love? This, and this only, is the source of all moral obedience, and is the only evidence of sensible union with God; for he that loveth, dwelleth in God, and God in him.

To the law was annexed a promise of *life*, with all its attendant happiness to the obedient; and the penalty of *death*, with all its awful consequences, to the transgressor.—Therefore—

In this sacred law, we are compelled to admire the wisdom, goodness, holiness, and justice of the Supreme Lawgiver; and by which, we are convinced, that in all his dispensations towards his creatures, he must do right. This persuasion is absolutely necessary to direct our enquiries after divine truth; and to ascertain God's way with men. This will effectually prevent us from calling his conduct in question, and preserve our spirits

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* Mark, xii. 30, 31.

in profound adoration of his glorious majesty. *The Lord's work is perfect; for all his ways are judgment; a God of truth, and without iniquity is he.*

The law of human nature was first revealed to our parents in Paradise; and was equally binding upon their posterity. How long that law was obeyed in its perfection, cannot be determined; but scripture and experience testify: *By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.* The one transgression, opened the way to unnumbered aggravated crimes; bearing in their train, darkness, wretchedness, and woe. A moral separation was hereby made, between God and his creature man. The injured justice of God, beheld the transgressor; and he, regardless of his state, by repeated offences, sunk deeper beneath the flames of provoked vengeance.

It is necessary for us to know, that the law, afterwards given by Moses, when the national covenant was ratified between God and Israel, and their government organized, was not a *new* law; but a revelation of the *essence* of the first law, in a manner more suitable to its nature, and the state of the people at that period. Those awful peals of thunder; the piercing lightning; the clouds of darkness; and the dreadful fire and smoke,
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which attended that most solemn transaction, and made Sinai tremble to its base, were a sufficient indication that the law then revealing, had been violated, and justice was incensed. After the first transgression, God could not have given another law, without impeaching his wisdom and goodness. For a judge to recommend the importance of keeping the violated law of the land, to a criminal, on whom he had passed sentence of death, in order for pardon, would be deemed a manifest insult offered to misery. Nor can we suppose the great Lawgiver and Judge of the universe, after having condemned his creatures for the violation of his law, would recommend to them, the future obedience of the same law, in order to merit his favour; or, have given them another law, while they were under the condemning sentence of the first. Both instances are alike inconsistent with the righteous judgment of the Almighty, though too often misapprehended by man. Besides, God knew, that by sin the human breast was defiled,—*that the carnal mind was ENMITY against him*—that it was not willingly *subject to his law, neither indeed could be.*

Here, we might drop a tear over the ruins of human nature. Under the righteous judgment of the Lord Almighty, and insensible of their wretchedness!—ignorant of their Creator's

Creator's righteousness, they attempt to establish a righteousness of their own, and fondly dream that God, because his anger delays, will receive them into his favour. Lord, what is man ! As a silly bird, when the fable curtain of the night is dropped, flies to a distant glimmering lamp, as an expected asylum—so man, eagerly rushes to the fiery flames of Sinai, as a mean of life, though death ensue. Has man thus impiously transgressed the sacred law of the Most Holy ? Has he, by his offences, lost his original rectitude, and merited the threatened curse ? Then, why does Justice stay her hand ? Why is the law again revealed, and sinful man allowed to live ? JESUS, the Son of God, engaged to redeem, and Mercy cries—Forbear !

With pitying eyes, the Prince of Grace
Beheld our helpless grief ;
He saw, and O, amazing love !
He came to our relief.

O for this love, let rocks and hills
Their lasting silence break,
And all harmonious human tongues
The Saviour's praises speak.

The gospel mystery is now unveiled. That law, delivered on Sinai's top, was in a MEDIATOR's hand, and Wrath stood silent by.* What the law could not do, in that it was weak through

* Romans, viii. 3.

through the flesh, God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh. Jesus was made under the law, that he might redeem man from its curse. By a life of unspotted purity, he obeyed that law which we had violated, drank that bitter cup which we deserved, and bowed his head in death, to redeem us from an abyss of woe. These sacred acts were rendered *infinitely meritorious* from the DIVINITY resident in his HUMANITY. Jesus is JEHOVAH, the LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. The law, in all its vast demands, is perfectly satisfied for those whom the Father gave into the hands of his Son to redeem. Christ and his Church are now one person, in the eye of the law; and it becomes the distinguishing privilege of every believer, to view himself in Christ, by whom alone he is protected from the storms of vengeance. In this august display of mercy, the SACRED THREE, ONE ETERNAL JEHOVAH, are revealed to man. The FATHER maintains the honour of his law—the ETERNAL SON obeys it for men, in his own person—the HOLY GHOST convinces a sinner of his need of salvation, and leads him to Christ; whose death is his title to life; and whose righteousness is unto all, and upon all them that believe. Mercy and Truth met together, Righteousness and Peace embraced each other in the great Council of Heaven—
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then, in the cross of Christ—and now, in the sensible sinner's conscience. Impressed with this immense goodness, we anticipate that great day, when the Almighty shall have collected the multitude of his redeemed, when he shall manifest the full glory of his grace, and the eternal arches of Heaven resound with the praises of HIM, who hath saved us by his blood.

If the foregoing sentiments be true, is not the law made void? No, by no means. It is infinitely more established by the law of FAITH, which *commands* us to believe on the complete obedience of Christ, to the moral law, as our only righteousness, than it could have been by our personal obedience. For, hereby God declares his righteousness, that he might be just, and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus. Our righteousness is hereby secured; and not like that of our first parents, capable of being lost. By the law of Faith, all boasting of creature-excellence is excluded; every mouth is stopped, and God alone is exalted in our everlasting salvation. Nevertheless, *the law is good, if a man use it lawfully.*—

- I. It teaches the knowledge of sin.* By it we are convinced of God's right to punish his offending creatures, and the necessity of salvation by some other way, or we must
perish

* Romans, iii. 20.

perish in our sins. The law is the great mean, used by the HOLY GHOST, in convincing of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment.* He draws aside the veil that is before it, so that it becomes a glass, in which we are compelled to see our own likeness, and determine our character before God. Paul, unreservedly acknowledges, he had not known sin, but by the law. He, like others, when ignorant of the nature and demand of the law, concluded himself alive to God, and his state secure. But, when the commandment entered his conscience, sin revived, and he died; having no hope of justification from it, he esteemed himself deserving the awful curse it pronounces.† These impressions produced the most fervent prayer, that he might be found IN CHRIST, not having his own righteousness, which was of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. This afforded the most unshaken confidence in God, and filled him with that joy and peace which made him triumph amidst the accumulated sufferings of his life.

Religion is a personal concern. In our present dark unhappy state by sin, it is absolutely necessary that we ask, What are the demands of that law by which we are bound to the Throne of JEHOVAH, that we might sensibly

* John, xvii.

† Romans, vii.

sensibly fly to the arms of his mercy? It is an undeniable fact, that we may remain in total ignorance of this all-important point, and be strangers to the sublime pleasures of the gospel of God, though we are constantly favoured with the Bible in our hand. Permit me then to ask the reader, if he has examined himself, and taken some serious views of immortality? Has the law penetrated your breast, convinced you of the heinousness of your personal transgressions, and arraigned your spirit at the Throne of Divine Judgment? *The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul;** and if you have felt its influence, it has led you in bitterness and tears to the Throne of Divine Mercy, saying—"Hear my prayer, O Lord! give ear to my supplications, in thy faithfulness answer me; and enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight no flesh living shall be justified."†

Perhaps there is no greater evidence of the extreme ignorance of men, than their attachment to the moral law, as a necessary passport to Heaven; notwithstanding God, and their conscience, bear testimony, that all have sinned. Nor is it uncommon to hear such say—"If we are not to be saved, and rewarded for keeping the law, what system can possibly answer the purpose?" To such

* Psalm xix. 7.

† Psalm cxliiii. 1, 2.

such we reply, we reprove you, not for thirsting after moral obedience; for those who pretend to adhere most to the law, give but little evidence by their temper, that they really live under its influence. Personal and social virtues are not so conspicuous in the circle of society, as to call for a check from the pulpit, or the press. But, it is our duty to caution those, who inconsiderately presume to *merit* the favour of Heaven, by their imperfect obedience to that law, which, in their serious moments, they find candour enough to acknowledge they have violated from their youth. Let such ask, What provision any human law has made, that a transgressor, on future obedience, shall be acquitted from that sentence to which his crime may have exposed him? If no such law exists, and common sense blushes on naming such an absurdity, what confusion should fill the breast of those who pretend to expect happiness from the inflexible law of God, when they themselves are found continued transgressors! It therefore becomes our duty to instruct the ignorant and self-righteous, the nature and extent of the law—how incapable they are of satisfying justice, either whole or in part—and direct them for a full salvation through the complete righteousness of the Son of God. Thus, instead of discountenancing moral obedience, we direct

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them to proper principles, that their lives may be more brilliant and useful in the sight of God and man.

If the reader is already instructed, and has felt the power of the law upon his heart, he will by no means attempt to palliate his offences, or atone for his transgressions by promises of present repentance, or future obedience. He finds the law of his God inflexible, demanding perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience; declaring, *He that offendeth in one point is guilty of all.* Nothing will or can satisfy the violated law, but the sacrifice of the Saviour; and nothing short of a personal assurance of interest in the same blessing, will satisfy the convinced conscience. Possessed of this, he finds a new channel opened for obedience; his heart glows with sacred love to the great Redeemer of his spirit, and he resigns himself to be the Lord's for ever.

From the recital of the power of the law upon the conscience, we do not insist that every person possesses equal sensibility. *There are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all.* Some may be said to rush upon the flames of Sinai, while its tremendous curse fills them with inexpressible distress. Others advance to the fiery mount, with slow and almost imperceptible steps; their first views of the law being extremely

tremely imperfect; but its purity and majesty gradually unfold, and bring them to unite with all in the pathetic cry of David—O Lord, *I beseech thee deliver my soul!*

II. Though the law says nothing of Christ, or affords the least hope to a sensible transgressor, by its entering the heart, and discovering its guilt, it is said to be a *schoolmaster to lead to Christ*. The term law, in this passage, is supposed by some to signify the Ceremonial law; its various sacrifices and offerings having a tendency to lead the Jews to Christ, the promised Messiah. But, it is equally true of the *effects* of the moral law upon an enlightened conscience. It is as a probe in the wound of the heart, and makes us sensible of our extreme need of the great Physician's balm. And, without this, it is absolutely impossible we should be solicitous to fly to the arms of sovereign mercy, or arise from that state of stupidity which naturally pervades the sinner's mind. In the process of conversion, there is an inseparable connection between the *law* and the *gospel*. The *terrors* of mount SINAI, will prepare the heart for the *mercies* of mount CALVARY.

III. The *precepts* of the law are of infinite use in teaching us the excellence of the person of Jesus; and its *penalties* are equally calculated to shew the nature of his death. The

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perfection of human characters can be estimated only by their conformity to the law of their creation; and of which, we can have no evidence but by the actions of their life. Jesus appeared in our nature, emblazoning the law by the exercise of every personal and social virtue; confirming the sentiment of Peter, that he was *holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners*. The perfection of his human character, in fully obeying the law of God, could alone enable him to work out a righteousness for our justification. One flaw in this foundation, would have destroyed our hopes for eternity! Let the enemies of christianity compare the person and life of Christ with the acknowledged law of our creation, and ask, What precept shines in those sacred TABLES, that are not equally resplendent in the great IMMANUEL?—and whether in *him* our nature has not been advanced to its highest perfection? His supreme and unparalleled LOVE to man—the brilliancy of his TRUTH—and the perfection of his DEVOTION, convey the fullest evidence that he was the BEAUTY OF HOLINESS—the promised MESSIAH—and the everlasting Son of God!

The *penalty* of the law denounced against transgressors, was DEATH, in every possible form it could assume. Separation from the blissful presence of God—the extreme sufferings of this mortal life—the disunion of soul
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and body—and the weight of vindictive vengeance against sin; these formed the bitter portion of the Saviour's cup. But, neither the purity of the *life* of Christ, nor the horror of his *death*, could have availed us, had they not received an *infinite dignity* by his union with the DIVINE. This gave lustre to his *person*, and efficacy to his obedience.

There are not a few who esteem Christ Jesus as having assumed our nature *only* to give us a copy of moral excellence, and discard the idea of his vicarious sacrifice. To such we may say, If Jesus is acknowledged to be so holy a person, must we not be induced to question the divine justice in the sufferings he endured, and the death which he died, unless they were to answer some very extraordinary purpose? The scripture solves the difficulty—He who knew no sin, was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. He died, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us unto God.

IV. The law *in Christ* may be used as a mean of sanctification. The letter of the law shews us our duty to love God, and our neighbour, but gives us no power to obey. The GOSPEL does both. The law is like the moon, that affords us light;—the gospel is as the sun, that gives light, heat and vegetation.

It has been asked, "If the law is not a sufficient rule of moral practice for those who are under the covenant of Grace?" To which we reply, However it was suited to our first parents in Paradise, as perfectly pure moral agents, it is not *sufficient* for us whose character by sin is the very reverse. We need farther discoveries than the law affords. That law dictates the religion of nature; but the gospel precepts, which evidently include and establish the moral law, and make them appear, if possible, with additional lustre, shew us the duties and privileges of our *new* and happy relation to God, as our Everlasting Covenant Father in Christ Jesus, and which cannot possibly be known by the law of Moses. Besides, our Lord and Master has given us *new* commandments, and established ordinances exactly suited to the gospel dispensation. If the ministration of death was glorious, how much more does the gospel, as the ministration of life, exceed in glory! To adhere to the moral law only, as a rule of obedience, indicates a temper unfavourable to the excellence of the gospel, and assuredly reflects on the wisdom and grace of its Almighty Author.

The moral law is not made void, either by the death of Christ, or in the life of the Christian. The HOLY SPIRIT, whose office it is to sanctify believers in Christ, writes the
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law anew upon their hearts, and more fully explains it by the rich variety of gospel precepts.* The great difference observable in the use of the moral law, as a rule of practice, is, some boast of a moral obligation to obey the law of God, without viewing it in Christ, and not living upon the grace of the gospel. Others evangelically receive the law, as glorified in Christ, and depend entirely upon the aid of Grace to enable them to understand and practice the will of God. In Christ the believer rests for justification, and awaits the just judgment of God, with a full assurance of hope. Nor will his hope allow him willingly to transgress the precepts of the law of Moses, the injunctions of the Prophets, or the commands of the Son of God. Though divorced from the law as a rule for justification, he obeys it from a principle of love to Christ.†

Every man of grace can experimentally say—"Though I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin, I still delight in the law of God, after the inward man. Though I find a law, that when I would do good, evil is present with me; the law of thy mouth, O my God, is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.

* Jeremiah, xxxiii. 31.

† Romans, vii.

silver. Thou shalt guide me with thy council, and afterwards bring me to glory!"

V. The law teaches us, that the final state of man must be according to the purity of Divine Judgment, whatever wrong conceptions we may form of it. God never can act inconsistent with himself. He hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead*. And, however the gospel, or other dispensations may enhance the condemnation of the wicked, they must, and will be judged by that law which binds them to the authority of God. Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father, said Jesus to the Jews; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom you trust. What promise has God given to any wicked man, who dies in his sins, that the law shall not condemn him? or, that in that most solemn day he shall be redeemed from its curse? Has not the Judge of all assured us, that the human soul, by sin, is capable of being lost; and if lost, that it cannot be regained? He who ventures to deny this solemn truth, must give the lie to those words of Christ in Mark, viii. 36, and esteem the representation
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* Acts, xvii. 31.

of the last judgment, and the punishment of the wicked, as a religious farce; and of course he must eventually deny the whole revelation of God. Let the reader estimate the value of his own soul, and look forward to eternity. Unless immersed in the delusive cares of life, or ensnared by evil habits, he will surely reflect on his obligation to the law, his incapacity to obey, and the necessity of an interest in the FRIEND OF SINNERS. We are to remember, that although we have lost our ability to obey, God's right to punish the impenitent sinner abideth forever, and binds him, as such, to the throne of his judgment. He that sinneth against God, wrongeth his own soul, and treasureth up anguish and woe for eternity. He, who, from a consciousness of guilt, flies for mercy to the cross of Jesus, is truly wise, and shall there find that peace and joy that shall never know an end.

FROM this interesting subject, we are constrained to stand with solemn awe of that ALMIGHTY LORD who holdeth our souls in life! Who can but fall before his brilliant Throne, and pronounce him to be
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just and holy in all his ways ! From his law, how great and terrible are the manifestations of his *justice*—how rich the expressions of his *mercy* through the agonies of his Son ! With boldness may we approach his gracious presence, and plead the virtue of a Saviour's blood. Impressed with the influence of his spirit, and under the displays of such astonishing goodness, who can but receive the precepts of the law, with the injunctions of the gospel, bind them upon their hearts, and practice them in their lives ? While living upon the fulness of Jesus, and passing through the paths of life, we fix our eyes on those gates of everlasting happiness, which the violated law of our God had shut against us, now opened through the infinitely meritorious sacrifice of the Prince of Peace. Life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel. We no longer start at Death, whose sting was formed by our transgression of the law, but cheerfully resign our spirits into the hand of HIM who hath redeemed us to God. Our flesh shall now rest in hope, and await the trump of God;—then, bursting from the confines of the grave, and our spirits re-united, we shall join the final judgment, amidst the inconceivable, august displays of mercy and of justice.

Blessed

Blessed is the man whose heart is thus prepared by the law to receive the grace of the gospel; and who as ardently thirsts after sanctification in Christ, to the glory of God, as it does to be saved from present anguish and future punishment.

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